Confronting "Unforeseen" Disasters: Yōko Tawada's Surrealist and Animistic Poetics

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Abstract

If our current environmental predicament, and recent catastrophes such as the nuclear meltdown at Fukushima in 2011, can be diagnosed as partly a crisis of the imagination, then radical action is needed. Ecopoetics can help by directing attention to the agentic properties of matter, and to the sometimes unexpected ways in which chains of events are brought about, through principles of both randomness and design. In Yōko Tawada's literary work, chance intra-actions between human and material agencies lead to a variety of surprising, surreal scenarios. Focusing on an array of Tawada's texts, with particular attention to her post-Fukushima novel, *The Last Children of Tokyo* (US title *The Emissary*, 2018, Japanese original *Kentōshi*, 2014), this article argues that Tawada's emphasis on the random and unexpected can provide a valuable ecopoetic perspective, serving both as political critique and as contribution to new materialist thought. Attention to material and linguistic agency is central to Tawada's surrealist and animistic poetics, which foregrounds what she describes as "language magic"—language as an agentic force of its own with a propensity for generating unexpected effects. By situating Tawada's post-Fukushima writing in the context of her wider work, I argue that her approach can help us to move to a less anthropocentric and agent-centric perspective through paying attention to the creative potential of language and matter, and to how these generate effects through processes of both randomness and design.

Keywords: Yōko Tawada, environmental disaster, ecopoetics, animism, surrealism, randomness, design, materialism, agency.

Resumen

Si los actuales problemas medioambientales y las recientes catástrofes tales como la fusión nuclear de Fukushima en 2011 pueden ser diagnosticados en parte como crisis de la imaginación, entonces es necesaria una acción radical. La ecopoética puede ser útil llamando la atención hacia las propiedades agentivas de la materia y las a veces inesperadas maneras en que se producen cadenas de acontecimientos por medio de aleatoriedad y de diseño. En la obra literaria de Yōko Tawada, las intra-acciones entre agentes humanos y materiales conducen a una variedad de escenarios sorprendentes y surrealistas. Centrado en una variedad de obras de Tawada, prestando especial atención a su novela post-Fukushima, *Los últimos niños de Tokio* (*The Last Children of Tokyo*, 2018; título US *The Emissary*, 2018, original japonés, *Kentōshi*, 2014), el presente artículo defiende la tesis de que el énfasis de Tawada sobre la aleatoriedad y lo inesperado puede facilitar una valiosa perspectiva ecopoética, sirviendo tanto como crítica política y como contribución a un nuevo pensamiento materialista. Central a la poética surrealista y animística de Tawada es la atención a la agencia material y lingüística, que ofrece un primer plano a lo que la autora describe como "magia del lenguaje"—el lenguaje como fuerza agentiva en sí misma y con propensión a generar efectos inesperados. Al situar la obra post-Fukushima de Tawada en el contexto de su obra general, mantengo que su enfoque puede sernos útil para acceder a una perspectiva menos antropocéntrica y menos centrada en la agentividad, prestando atención al potencial creativo del lenguaje y la materia, y a la manera en que dichos aspectos generan efectos a través de procesos tanto de aleatoriedad como de diseño.

Palabras clave: Yōko Tawada, desastre medioambiental, ecopoética, animismo, surrealismo, aleatoriedad, diseño, materialismo, agencia.

"It is absolutely safe to start the nuclear reactor as long as nothing unforeseen happens."

The quote above, from Yōko Tawada's short story "The Far Shore" (n. p.; Japanese original "Higan," 2014), recalls a line of critique that was prominent in the weeks after the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown at Fukushima power station. Following the catastrophe, the media repeatedly quoted politicians and scientists using the word "unforeseeable" to describe these events. This word choice led to an uproar among the general public, who criticised the politicians and scientists for their serious lack of foresight and imagination (Angles n. p.). "The Far Shore," Tawada's story of fictional nuclear disaster, imagines how things might go wrong. A nuclear meltdown is brought about through the banal situation of a sparrow flying into the motor of a military plane, which then crashes into the power plant: "You could hardly get more unforeseen than that" (n. p.), the narrator says, explaining, "Wars are not unusual in today's world. If a fighter jet had crashed during a battle, no one would have considered that unforeseeable" (n. p.). The narrator highlights an irony of modern life, which makes us accustomed to the risks of warfare, but less inclined to anticipate chance processes that lie outside human control. As he crashes to his death, the pilot himself thinks about the tragic irony of the situation: "It's so stupid I can't even laugh about it. What a meaningless way to die" (Tawada, "Far Shore" n.p.). Such reflection upon the randomness of events constitutes an ecopoetic intervention by destabilising paradigms of human control and conscious design.

By emphasising the surprising effects of often absurd chains of events throughout her literary work, Tawada poses a challenge to anthropocentric views of agency. By ignoring other agencies—the non-human actants in our environment—we can fail spectacularly in the very act of imagination that may ensure our survival: the act of foreseeing possible consequences of our actions, especially where they interact with other agencies. Such short-sightedness gives rise to irresponsible assurances that we are "ready for any unforeseen event that may or may not occur" (words attributed to former US Vice-President Dan Quale). Ecocriticism frequently diagnoses our current predicament as at least partly a "crisis of the imagination" (Buell 2). To remedy this crisis, one recent approach within ecocriticism is to highlight the "vitality" of matter (Bennett xiii). Instead of thinking of agency as something "necessarily and exclusively associated with human beings and with human intentionality" (Iovino and Oppermann, *Material Ecocriticism* 3), new materialists invite us to think of vitality as "a pervasive and inbuilt property of matter, as part and parcel of its generative dynamism" (ibid.). In responding to environmental crisis, therefore, materialist approaches invite us to expand our attention to the multiple interchanges between human and non-human agencies. Attending to these interchanges often means attending to processes that occur randomly, without apparent pattern or predictability. Such random processes play a particularly important role in literary work that does not assert authorial design as primary, but that is attuned to the fluctuations of language and matter.

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Yōko Tawada's work centres upon language and materiality, which she explores in surprising and productive ways. She writes in Japanese but also German, a language she acquired as a young adult, and which serves as creative inspiration for much of her literary output. Reflecting on the sounds and composition of words and the cultural assumptions lying behind language, Tawada's work is open to creativity as a process based on the making of random connections. Since her first publication in 1987, Tawada has amassed a substantial body of work in both languages, encompassing poems, short stories, plays, novels and non-fictional work such as essays and reflections on literary aesthetics. Her work has garnered acclaim not only in Germany and Japan, but also further afield, with her work translated into numerous languages.[1] Her playful and yet astute critical perspective has inspired a large body of international scholarship that approaches her work from various perspectives. Leslie Adelson identifies three main trajectories of Tawada scholarship: that which situates Tawada's work in relation to contexts of cultural globalisation; that which discusses it in connection to traditions of surrealist aesthetics; and that which considers it in relation to translation studies (158). While inter-cultural dynamics and language play are often prominent topics within existing scholarship on Tawada's writing, her attention to the animate properties of both language and matter has not yet been brought systematically into connection with material ecocriticism and ecopoetics, though it offers an illuminating contribution to these fields. The generative potential of language and matter in Tawada's work is a product of both randomness and design, something that Tawada foregrounds thematically and demonstrates stylistically.

In order to explore how Tawada's work might contribute to ecocritical discourse, this article will take as a starting point some of Tawada's post-disaster texts, which emerged in response to the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake, tsunami and meltdown at Fukushima nuclear power station. At the time, Tawada was due to give a set of poetics lectures in Hamburg, in which she planned to discuss Hamburg as a harbour city and water as a connecting force. After the disaster occurred, Tawada changed the content of her lectures—eventually published in the collection *Fremde Wasser* (*Foreign Waters*, 2012)—to engage more directly with the events in Japan.[2] In her subsequent literary work, Tawada imagined post-disaster scenarios in a couple of dystopian short stories written in Japanese. In "Fushi no Shima" (2011, translated as "The Island of Eternal Life," 2012), the narrator, who holds a Japanese passport, is unable to travel to Japan. The country has been cut off from the rest of the world following political unrest and massive contamination from nuclear fallout after a catastrophic earthquake. Her story "The Far Shore," as discussed earlier, envisions an "unforeseen" disaster at a nuclear reactor, which leaves many dead, and many on ships bound for China. Tawada has also explored the disaster in German texts that are as yet unpublished: the play *Still*

[1] Tawada's literary awards include the Akutagawa Prize, the Tanizaki Prize, the Noma Literary Prize, the Izumi Kyōka Prize for literature, the Gunzo Prize for New Writers, the Goethe Medal and the Kleist Prize.
[2] Kathrin Maurer has discussed these lectures, along with Tawada's story "The Island of Eternal Life" in her article 'Translating Catastrophes: Yoko Tawada's Poetic Responses to the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake, the Tsunami, and Fukushima" (2016).

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Fukushima: wenn die Abendsonne aufgeht (*Still Fukushima: When the Evening Sun Rises)* and the collection of poetry entitled *Neue Gedichte über Fukushima* (*New Poems on Fukushima*), which accompanied an exhibition of photography by Delphine Parodi-Nagaoka.[3] Tawada's most extensive engagement with post-disaster scenarios, however, is through her short novel *The Last Children of Tokyo* (2018, titled *The Emissary* in the US edition, and published originally in Japanese in the prose and poetry collection *Kentōshi*, 2014).[4] Though this article engages with an array of texts by Tawada, including her pre-Fukushima work, particular attention will be paid to *The Last Children of Tokyo*. As well as imagining ecological disaster, this novel shows how ecopoetic attention to random material and linguistic intra-actions can invite attention to the multiplicity of agency. The novel will be examined through the English translation of Margaret Mitsutani, with reference to the Japanese original where helpful.

The Last Children of Tokyo is set in a future Japan ravaged by environmental crisis and an oppressive political regime. Japan has reverted to a state reminiscent of the pre-Edo era, without cars or electricity, and has closed itself off to the rest of the world. The novel follows Yoshiro, who is over a hundred years old, and like others of his generation appears unable to die. By contrast, the children of this country, including his great-grandson Mumei, whom he looks after, are frail and grey-haired, barely able to survive. The only hope is for a select few children to be smuggled out of the country as emissaries, to help the world learn from Japan's example. While apocalyptic narratives typically "[play] on fears and [convey] a sense of the extreme urgency of radical action" (Goodbody, "Climate Change" 297), Tawada's dystopian fiction instead uses wit and surprise, not so much in order to enjoin us to act, but to invite us to re-think concepts that we take for granted. In foregrounding the random and unexpected, Tawada's post-disaster texts also serve as political critique, problematising assurances of human control over nature and society's capacity to design effective environmental policies.

This article first addresses Tawada's political critique in her post-disaster texts, in which she places emphasis on the "intra-actions" between politics and material agencies, highlighting the unintended effects that play out on a global scale. I use the term "intra-action" as proposed by Karen Barad, as a way of signifying the "mutual constitution of entangled agencies. That is, in contrast to the usual 'interaction' which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action" (33). The entanglement of agency is explored further in the second section of this article, which examines how the random and unexpected is articulated through Tawada's surrealist poetics. I argue that Tawada's *animistic* and *aleatory* approach to writing shifts attention from authorial agency to the vibrant matter

[3] The play *Still Fukushima: wenn die Abendsonne aufgeht* was staged at a number of theatres and cultural institutions, for example in Berlin and Beijing. Tawada's *Neue Gedichte über Fukushima* were written for the exhibition *Out of Sight. Gedichte – Fotographien* at the Japanisch-Deutsches Zentrum Berlin in February - March 2014. Since the poetry collection is as yet unpublished, apart from one poem (which this article discusses), the focus will primarily be on other, published texts.

[4] The Japanese title, *Kentōshi*, is closer in meaning to the US title *The Emissary*.

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that shapes the narrative. The third section shows how material dynamism is linked to Tawada's conception of linguistic dynamism or "language magic"—language as an agentic force with its own propensity for generating unintended effects and opening up worlds. Finally, I examine reflection on language in Tawada's post-disaster texts, particularly the loss of words as part of a wider ecological crisis, a reduction in attention to the surrounding world. The article thus examines Tawada's ecopoetics of randomness and design by highlighting the nexus between material and linguistic dynamism, and the shift from conscious authorial design to exploring the random, unique and surprising properties of words and things.

Failures to Foresee: A Political Critique

Tawada's post-disaster texts offer a pointed political critique of the decision-making processes and risk assessment surrounding the use of nuclear power, issues much discussed in the aftermath of the Tōhoku disaster. For example, in "The Far Shore," the controversial decision to restart an old nuclear reactor is made at an international conference:

> Their conclusion: "It is absolutely safe to start the nuclear reactor as long as nothing unforeseen happens." The participants were all experts who had gathered from twenty-two nations. They were known to have divergent views on the project, so it was hard to imagine that someone had bought them all off. Even so, their conclusion hardly seemed objective or scientific. Anymore [sic], political decisions seemed to happen of their own accord without any regard for individual will. (n. p.)

The passage highlights the disparity between the global experts tasked with making the decision, and the local community, who have not been consulted. Moreover, the experts' divergent views make reaching a conclusion seem unlikely. The narrator considers corruption, but settles for an explanation that relies on a mysterious agency:

> A new form of global economics had taken root. Invisible signals flew from brain to brain, and before anyone knew what was happening, people began to assume identical opinions. Once they had, a certain amount of money was automatically deposited in their bank accounts. To this day, biologists and economists have not been able to offer positive proof of this new mechanism of corruption, but there are many people, especially among poets, who cannot help suspecting that is how things work. ("The Far Shore" n. p.)

The satirical scenario envisions a corrupt form of political decision-making, based not on individual will, but on "invisible signals" coupled with financial reward for intellectual conformity. A wider agency seems to be involved here: the "invisible signals" might be variously envisioned as mysterious non-human forces or as the subtle workings of linguistic messages reproduced in global media. Either way, this process limits diversity of thought. It is only those who stand outside the system, particularly poets with their skills of observation, who suspect ways in which independent thought may be corrupted, and thereby play the role of critical onlookers and commentators.

Tawada's political satire is particularly levelled at the ways in which local communities and individuals are subjected to the whims of international politics. Tawada's ecocritical contribution operates from what Ursula Heise terms an "eco-cosmopolitan" position (50-63). In Tawada's work this means attending to the power

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dynamics between the local and the global, as well as focusing on the national and international politics surrounding environmental crisis. Like her short story "The Far Shore," Tawada's novel *The Last Children of Tokyo*[5] explores ways in which individual will is subject to political decisions that seem to be made randomly, or at least show no principles of rational design that the public has access to. Corporate greed and political corruption appear to play a role, however. In this novel, the Japanese government has been privatised, though it is not clear whether the newly elected members of the Diet of the Supreme Court really exist or are simply photographs with names. As the narrator explains:

> The Diet's main job was to fiddle around with the laws. Judging from how often the laws changed, someone was definitely fiddling with them. Yet the public was never told who made the changes, or for what purpose. Afraid of getting burned by laws they hadn't heard of everyone kept their intuition honed sharp as a knife practicing restraint and self-censorship on a daily basis. (*LCT* 89)

This Kafkaesque situation positions the individual as helplessly subjected to constantly changing state regulations. Reducing individual autonomy means that unknown agencies assume greater prominence. Tawada's political critique works by satirising the idea of political decisions being the outcome of rational design and a reflection of individual will. The design process, if there is one, is governed by at most a select few individuals whose interests are not those of the general public. Moreover, by removing the design process from view, occurrences appear to the public as random. This sense of randomness is based on a lack of access to processes operating at wider levels, for example in national and global politics, and on a failure to envision how these processes may intra-act with local environments.

Attending to the relationship between individual, local behaviour and large-scale global effects is central to any understanding of environmental crisis. Environmental philosopher Val Plumwood demonstrates how private interests may set off a chain of unintended effects through her moving account of an ecological disaster she witnessed. Walking along the beach in Tasmania, she encountered daily the bodies of dead Fairy Penguins washed up on the beach. Only much later did she discover the reason for the penguins' deaths. Fish farms thousands of miles away along the Western Australian coast had acquired permission to import wild South African pilchards to feed their salmon rather than relying on local pilchards. These South African pilchards were just marginally cheaper than the local variety, but ended up spreading disease into local stocks which lacked immunity. Millions of Western Australian pilchards died, while those marine creatures whose diet relied upon them, including Fairy Penguins, starved (14). Plumwood sees the unintended consequences as the product of an ecological crisis of reason—a form of rationality in which the "simple, abstract rules of equivalence and replaceability do not fit the infinitely complex world of flesh and blood, root and web on which they are so ruthlessly imposed" (14). An anecdote in *The Last Children of Tokyo*,

[5] This title will hereafter be abbreviated as *LCT* in parenthetical documentation.

reminiscent of Plumwood's tale, highlights precisely such a complex chain of global circumstances behind the production of food:

> Though [Yoshiro] was always on the lookout for food Mumei could eat without trouble, he never bought products unless he knew where they came from. Once thousands of dead penguins had washed up on a beach in South Africa, and a company run by an international pirate gang had dried the meat, which it then ground into powder to make meat biscuits for children. According to the newspaper, another company was smuggling the biscuits into Japan, making a killing. The biscuits reminded Yoshiro of dog food, but having heard they were an ideal protein source for children he definitely wanted to buy some. The meat of penguins who had lived in Antarctica would probably not be very contaminated, though such a mass death might mean that an oil tanker had sunk nearby, which was worrying. (94-95)

The narrator describes in a matter-of-fact tone a situation in which mass extinction, contamination and pollution, children's health problems, and food shortages have become a daily reality. Under these circumstances, Yoshiro's primary concern is for his great-grandson. While his ethics of care extends as far as Mumei, he has little scope to alter the realities of his world, and to address the problem that Plumwood diagnoses as a "lack of fit or adaptation of societies structured by hegemonic rationality to their ecological and social realities" (15). Something must have gone wrong for Yoshiro and Mumei to be forced to live in an environment in which they perhaps will no longer be able to leave the house in a few years' time (*LCT* 10); and as Mumei's teacher points out, the problem is not just earthquakes and tsunamis: "if natural disasters were the only problem, we certainly would have recovered long before now" (*LCT* 122). The ecological crisis of reason in this society consists in an inability to see and foresee wider chains of effects resulting from intra-actions between local and global occurrences.

Yōko Tawada's Animistic Ecopoetics

Tawada's attention to surprising chains of events and unintended effects places her work in the tradition of surrealism. In surrealist literature, protagonists regard extraordinary occurrences with bland indifference (Jackson 21). Random and inexplicable processes are accepted as the norm. Bettina Brandt argues that Tawada uses surrealism as an aesthetic strategy, which "interrupts our debates and in doing so insists on the unknown character," that is, it leaves us with enigmatic images which remain ununifiable (120). Surrealist writing is often both surprising and humorous, but also demands that we confront the question of what we take to be "normal" and "foreseeable." When it comes to averting ecological crises, an examination of our horizons of expectation proves vital, as does an expanded awareness of possibilities. Though Tawada is not typically positioned as a writer of ecopoetry, her post-disaster work can be considered a form of ecopoetics in the sense of being a creative literary engagement (*poiesis*) directed at ecological issues. As Scott Knickerbocker argues, the "same imaginative and intellectual muscles we exercise in our deep consideration of poetry are needed in meaningfully relating to nature—and vice versa" (18). In this sense, poetry in general can help to build better capacities for environmental engagement; even more so, where poetic practice or critical engagement intersects with

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attention to the environment. While Tawada's surrealist techniques are productive in disrupting normality and expanding the imagination, her post-Fukushima texts also offer more specific engagement with political and cultural responses to environmental crisis.

In Tawada's texts, literary writers have the role of communicating and critically reflecting on environmental crises. By doing so, they counteract the kind of intellectual conformity that led to the decision to re-open the nuclear power-plant. For example, in *The Last Children of Tokyo*, there is widespread support for a policy of Japanese isolation, reminiscent of the isolationist foreign policy of Edo-era Japan. In the novel, the policy is announced by the government after having already been put into practice, spurring a wave of articles in support of the policy:

> [...] many of the public intellectuals who wrote these articles—though actually opposed to isolation—found the humiliation of having the policy so suddenly sprung upon them unbearable, as if they were being made to eat dirt; besides, if they admitted they'd been duped like everybody else their careers would be ruined, so now, in an about-face so obvious it would have amazed even Aesop's grape-loving fox, they all insisted that they had supported isolation all along and in fact had been just about to recommend it to the government. (*LCT* 89)

The scenario satirises self-promoting intellectual conformity, showing opinions to be formed not on the basis of considered judgement, but as dubious responses to uncomfortable affects such as humiliation. Within this society, there is little scope for individual autonomy and independent, divergent thinking. Those who might be able to provide non-conformist perspectives are poets and writers, such as Yoshiro. Yet after Yoshiro submits an article entitled "Japan Was Not Isolated," to show how strong Japan's connections to the outside world had been during the Edo period, requests from magazines dry up (*LCT* 89-90).

If literary writing is necessary, since it encourages divergent thinking, according to Tawada, then a writing practice or poetics that emphasises randomness and the unexpected may be particularly productive. Greater attention to the material world, and to material agencies, Tawada implies, is also vital in developing capacities to foresee diverse occurrences. Tawada's attention to material agencies expands her surrealist poetics into an ecopoetics based on the animism of words and things. The concept of animism has been understood in varying ways. Victorian anthropologist Edward Tylor's definition of animism as "belief in spirits" found in "primitive culture" has been particularly influential. But more recent engagements with what Graham Harvey calls "the new animism" (5), take a different approach, influenced in particular by the work of Irving Hallowell.[6] Harvey explains the new approach: "this animism refers to ways of living that assume that the world is a community of living persons, all deserving respect, and therefore to ways of inculcating good relations between persons of different species" (5). Animism can be understood not only as a world view, but also as a poetic practice. An animistic ecopoetics can be understood, according to such a view, as a process of artistic creation that does not just attribute feeling to inert matter, but as one

[6] See Hallowell's "Ojibwa Ontology, Behaviour, and World View" (1960).

that is responsive to the intricate and complex ways in which things act and change. Tim Ingold describes such a model of creation as one based on an "ontology of animism," which, he argues, is not a way of "thinking *about* the world, but of being alive to it, characterized by a heightened sensitivity and responsiveness, in perception and action, to an environment that is in perpetual flux, never the same from one moment to the next" (214). By writing a novel that is not only concerned with environmental crisis but also with the acts of writing about environmental crisis, Tawada embraces such an ecopoetics.

An "ontology of animism" stands in opposition to what Ingold terms a "hylemorphic model" of creation, in which an active agent, with a particular goal in mind, imposes form (*morphe*) on supposedly passive, inert matter (*hyle*) (213). Tawada has discussed her approach to literary writing in similar terms. For her, an author is not someone who—authoritatively and purposefully—imposes form on inert matter, but rather someone who responds to things, ideas, stories or words that are already in the world, and allows them to lead the act of writing into new directions. Her favourite Japanese word for writer, she claims, is "*monogaki*" ("writer of things"):

> The "thing" of monogaki, the "writer of things," is semantically connected to mononoke, a "changeling." Which means that this "writer of things" also describes a person in the clutches of changelings and shapeshifters, a person under the spell of things. The writer takes what the things have said, and carves them into shapes by scratching out lines, making the wounds and scars on paper that we call texts. But when these writers begin writing they have no clear idea what sort of tale it will turn into because even as they write, the "ling" underlying these changes takes charge and decides how the tale will progress. ("Tawada Yōko Does Not Exist" 14)

Tawada adopts an *aleatory* approach to literary writing—letting the things and words direct the narrative, and lead the narrative into unknown directions (see Beaney 135-36). The author, in her conception, does not stand in an exploitative relationship with the story, but helps readers shift their attention towards the vibrant or agentic properties of language and matter. Rather than attempting to manipulate language into expressing particular ideas, and to select and control the subject of the story, the animistic writer understands language as already part of the fabric of the world with a host of pre-existing and possible associations. Like the materialist concept of "storied matter," which seeks to replace a concept of inert matter with attention to matter as the site of narrativity (see Cohen ix.), language is not so much a tool for the writer as literature's generative source.

Tawada's poetry exemplifies her approach to language and matter particularly clearly. The series of short poems *Neue Gedichte über Fukushima*, which accompanied photographs of Fukushima by Delphine Parodi-Nagaoka,[7] each build upon an image, observation or linguistic utterance, and explore their poetic potential. In the final poem of the cycle (number twenty-four), a phrase encountered on the door to a hairdressing salon serves as the basis for poetic reflection:

[7] See footnote 3. Both Parodi-Nagaoka and Tawada had visited Fukushima after the disaster, and the exhibition is the product of their collaborative reflection upon the situation of Fukushima inhabitants after the catastrophe.

Fukushima 24	*Fukushima No. 24*
„Heute Ruhetag" steht an der	*"Closed Today" says the*
Tür eines Friseursalons. Seit	*door of the beauty salon. For*
drei Jahren hört der	*three years now the day*
Tag „Heute" nicht	*called today has lasted*
mehr auf und die Haare	*and all the hair*
wachsen woanders.	*is growing someplace else.*
	(Translated by Susan Bernofsky)

Three years on from the Fukushima disaster, with shops and businesses still closed, the phrase "closed today" evokes the wider absence in the local area. Language expands beyond its original intention, taking on new resonances. In her article on animism in modernist poetics, Irene Albers draws attention to André Breton's references to words as "germinating," "playing," or "making love," and Michel Leiris's view of words as "humus or fertile soil, from which books grow" (Albers 243). This depiction of language as vegetation, Albers argues, is the euphoric version of what might be termed the "animism of language" in modernist literature (243).[8] In the poem above, the sudden incongruity of hair "growing" someplace else (rather than being cut someplace else, as might be more readily evoked by the closing of the hair salon), reiterates the sense of expansion, continuation and growth conveyed in the idea of the day "today" never ending. At the same time, "Haare wachsen woanders" underscores the lack of growth in the Fukushima area. While Tawada's poem plays with the kind of disjointed and incongruous imagery cultivated by surrealism, and perhaps also with the haiku's fertile gap between images, it is helpful to see her surrealist poetics as part of a broader animistic perspective, in which words have animate properties, rather than simply being tools that the writer uses. Thus, the surrealist use of "free association" is not simply a projection of the writer's subconscious, but proves dependent on the properties of language itself, including its sounds and associations. Following Karen Barad's notion of "intra-action," we might claim that the poem emerges in intra-action with the writer's design, where the design process means "reading" words and things rather than imposing form upon them. The sense of incongruity and randomness in Tawada's work is a result of allowing words and things to enter into new and unexpected connections through attending to them as agents rather than as mere signifiers or inert matter.

The Animism of Language

In Tawada's work, sensitivity to the "animism of language" and to material animism are part of the same impulse. In an interview in which she discussed her novel

[8] In using the term "Animismus der Sprache" (which I translated as "animism of language"), Albers is drawing on a phrase used by Pierre-Henri Kleiber in his book on Michel Leiris, in which he speaks of an "animisme langagie[r]" (105).

Memoirs of a Polar Bear (2017), Tawada commented: "animism is second nature to me, and it has something to do with language itself: in words, all objects are as much alive as animals. They have a soul—stones or iron, as much as birds" ("The Fabulist" n. p.). The title of her doctoral dissertation reiterates her interest in both linguistic and material animism: *Toys and Language Magic: An Ethnographic Poetology (Spielzeug und Sprachmagie: eine ethnologische Poetologie,* 2000*)*. Tawada's concept of "language magic" involves an animistic perception of words as capable of generating narrative possibilities. For example, in her discussion of Kafka's unfinished story "Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor", Tawada reads the unexpected appearance of two balls bouncing independently around Blumfeld's room—a seemingly random element in the narrative—as a process based on both homophony and metonymy. First, while Blumfeld is walking upstairs, he is thinking about a dog and its "Bellen" ("barking"), which raises an acoustic association with "Bällen" ("balls," a homophone). Secondly, Tawada claims, a metonymic process is at work based on dogs liking to play with balls (140). These musings give rise to what happens next: the unexpected appearance of two balls in Blumfeld's room. In Kafka's text, language is 'magically' transformed or animated, becoming a new material element within the narrative, just as in his more famous *Metamorphosis*, the insult "Ungeziefer" ("vermin") becomes physical reality. Like Kafka, Tawada uses word play to shape the narrative at a material level, thereby allowing randomness, as well as design, to be part of the creative process.

Tawada's own use of "language magic" can be traced in the ways in which she plays with the surface of language and uses sounds to generate unexpected associations and ideas. Thus, the German title of one of her story collections, *Überseezungen*, plays upon the word "Übersetzungen" ("translations") and references "übersee Zungen" ("over-sea tongues") as well as "über Seezungen" ("about soles"—a fish mentioned in the book). Similarly, the Japanese title of "The Island of Eternal Life"—"Fushi no shima"—plays on the place name "Fukushima," but uses the new association generated by the title, that of an island of "fushi," meaning "undead" or "immortal," as an idea in the text (Suter 158). The same idea is revisited on a larger scale in *The Last Children of Tokyo*, in which the older generation are unable to die. Susan Anderson has argued that Tawada's "translation of the surfaces of language—that is, her focus on letters, sounds, discrepancies between words and images, and on other aspects of linguistic form—ultimately makes both German and Japanese enigmatic, animated, and multivalent" (50). The concept of "surface translation" elucidates Tawada's poetic approach more broadly, which brings in elements of randomness through attending to the creative potential of language.

The increasing critical attention to matter, and to what Jane Bennett calls the "vibrant" properties of matter, has sometimes been characterised as a turn away from an exclusive emphasis on language and discourse. Iovino and Oppermann, for example, write: "Resisting the emphasis on linguistic constructions of the world, formulated by some trends of postmodern thought, the new materialist paradigm is premised on the integral ways of thinking language and reality, meaning and matter together" (*Material Ecocriticism* 4). As they suggest, attention to materiality does not mean ignoring the

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linguistic, but it does mean thinking both about the ways in which matter produces dynamics of meaning and about the ways in which language shapes the material world. Writers who perceive language as animate do this extensively. In Tawada's work, unexpected elements are frequently the result of transformations between language and matter. This is illustrated by a short text about a computer programme that allows the narrator to write in both German and Japanese. While typing in German, occasionally a "letter spirit" ("Buchstabengespenst") would arise and a combination of German letters would turn into a Japanese character, with meanings such as "cheering," "tormenting" or "sneezing." The narrator comments: "it was as if the small spirits that live under the surface of the text wanted to torment me and at the same time cheer" (*Verwandlungen* 41, my translation). As well as exploring language transforming into animate matter, Tawada also explores matter as language. A staple remover ("Heftklammerentferner") thus becomes the basis for exploring language: "In one's mother tongue, words are stapled together so closely that you can rarely enjoy playful pleasure with language […]. In a foreign language you have something like a staple remover: it removes everything that is collected and stapled together" (*Talisman* 15, my translation). Though Tawada's animistic view of language and matter might be seen as rooted in her Japanese heritage, particularly in Shintoism, she discourages cultural essentialism, subtly challenging the idea of animism as absent in Western culture. For example, a Japanese narrator sees her German colleague getting angry with a pencil, and comments: "In Japan I have never heard a person get angry with a pencil as if it were a person. That's German animism, I thought" (*Talisman* 10, my translation).[9]

As well as using language magic as a poetic principle, Tawada's texts often deal thematically with the intra-actions of language and matter. In "The Far Shore," politician Sede experiences a surprising physical effect after he responds to a reporter's questions about foreign policy by saying something nasty about China. Withdrawing to a back room, Sede discovers that the problem that has troubled him for years has gone—he has been freed from impotence. His outspoken remarks lead to him getting more votes than ever, and he concludes: "this just goes to show that I'm not really a man unless I'm on the offensive. I've got to act like I'm going to take down any big thing that stands in my way" ("The Far Shore" n. p.). Tawada's narrative figures language as having a powerful physical effect on the body, engendering the affects that shape political discourse. As critique of macho politics, the anecdote imagines how sound decision making is replaced by bigotry, since it offers the politician a means of overcoming personal inadequacies. To understand the politics of environmental discourse, the text suggests, we would do well to attend to ways in which individuals are traversed by the hidden agencies of language and affect. This means imagining the subject not as fully autonomous, but as co-constituted by linguistic and material processes. As Axel Goodbody argues, referencing Timothy Clark's *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, engaging with an expanded sense of self is the

[9] Though the "animism of language" in Tawada's work offers a valuable perspective with which to approach new material ecocriticism, her animist approach has a much longer literary history. In *Toys and Language Magic*, Tawada engages with the work of German Romantic writer E.T.A. Hoffmann, a master in the art of bringing things to life—toys, inanimate objects, or people who take on nonhuman forms.

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ultimate conundrum for the novelist in the Anthropocene ("Epilogue" 319). One way of re-imagining the self in light of new materialist emphasis on entangled agency is to highlight intra-actions both between and within human bodies: "If embodiment is the site where a 'vibrant matter' performs its narratives, and if human embodiment is a problematic entanglement of agencies, then the body is a privileged subject for material ecocriticism" (Iovino and Oppermann, "Material" 84). Affects alter bodies in material ways, and thereby pose a challenge to the idea of identities as fixed, as well as to the anthropocentric idea of agency as an exclusively human attribute. Tawada's work assumes multiple agencies, none of which are entirely predictable. By highlighting "other" agencies, through an animistic poetics of random intra-actions, Tawada offers an ecological critique.

The Ecological Crisis of Language

While Tawada's ecopoetics is based on a concept of matter and language as animate, her work also *thematically* foregrounds reflections upon the intra-actions of matter and language. *The Last Children of Tokyo* constantly reflects upon language, particularly ways in which language use has changed following environmental collapse and radical political change. For example, the novel begins with Yoshiro coming back from his run with a rent-a-dog, a practice previously known as "jogging," as the narrator informs us (*LCT* 3). Yet with foreign words falling out of use due to the xenophobic political climate, the activity has come to be referred to as "loping down," which evokes associations with the word "eloping." The translator, Margaret Mitsutani, has used "loping down" for the Japanese *kakeochi*, meaning to run away or elope. The narrator explains that the term "loping down" originated as a joke, via the expression "if you lope, your blood pressure goes down" (*LCT* 3). In written Japanese, the kanji which make up the word *kakeochi,* 駆 and 落, convey the meaning of running (translated as "loping") and falling respectively.[10] The randomness created through chance linguistic association as well as changing social and environmental conditions both play a role in linguistic evolution. Similarly, the English words written on Yoshiro's shoes—"Iwate made" ("made in Iwate prefecture")—are interpreted in a different way by the younger generation, who read "made" (written in *katakana*[11]) as the Japanese word meaning "to" or "until," since they no longer study English (*LCT* 5).

Language use is not only evolving, but, like the environment depicted in Tawada's novel, it finds itself in a state of crisis, with words and expressions constantly becoming obsolete. Val Plumwood's concept of an ecological crisis of reason—reason that fails to acknowledge the complex interactions of the living world—also coincides with a crisis of language. By failing to acknowledge the complex interactions of the living world, we are also losing the words with which to do so, and failing to create new language adequate

[10] I would like to thank Maria Römer for assistance with my reading of the Japanese text.

[11] Japanese combines three writing systems: next to *kanji* (or ideograms) and *hiragana*, the syllabics used for native Japanese words, *katakana* is the syllabic system employed for terms imported from languages like English.

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to respond to the reconfigured conditions. Reflecting on Yoshiro's use of the outmoded expression "to go for a walk," the narrator of *The Last Children of Tokyo* comments: "the shelf life of words was becoming shorter all the time—it wasn't only the foreign ones that were falling out of use" (4). The loss of the phrase "to go for a walk" suggests the loss of leisure walking, an idea supported when Mumei wants to have an indoor picnic since they are unable to spend time outdoors (*LCT* 10). The crisis of language exposes the wider social and environmental disintegration.

Language crisis is countered in the novel, however, through an insistence on language play as the basis for new perspectives and ideas. For example, Yoshiro is reminded of an exercise class called "Learn to Limber Up from the Octopus" when the baker mentions "tendons," which is written with a similar-looking kanji to "octopus." This random visual association sparks the following dialogue:"'I'd like to see everything from an optical point of view.' 'Optical?' 'No. I meant octopi. I want to see through the eyes of an octopus'" (*LCT* 15). The translator, Margaret Mitsutani, has played on the similarity between "octopus" and "optical." In the Japanese text, Tawada plays on "tasha no me" ("the eyes of another") and "taco" ("octopus"), thereby using linguistic association to introduce incongruous images. A similar example can be found when Yoshiro takes Mumei to the dentist because his baby teeth are all dropping out at once. Yoshiro says "Fall out," and quickly corrects himself, "hoping the dentist didn't think he'd said *fallout*," a word suggesting nuclear pollution (*LCT* 16-17). In playing on the word "fall out," Mitsutani introduces a reference to an unspoken environmental crisis, which fits with the overall content of the novel. However, she departs from the word play in the original Japanese text, which is based on the homophone 欠ける (*kakeru*, meaning "to fall out") and 書ける (*Kakeru*, meaning "to write"). While Mitsutani's translation allows for the generation of new associations and ideas, Tawada's play with language goes further: it enables subtle acts of resistance against forces of linguistic censorship and reductions in ways of thinking.

An awareness of linguistic heritage and diversity is indeed important in countering the crisis in language that has accompanied ecological decay. As centenarian and member of one of the generations that are unable to die, Yoshiro remembers words that are no longer used, storing in his head what Mumei refers to as "dead words" (114). While Yoshiro's linguistic memory acts as a link to a time before the extreme ecological disasters, Mumei is constantly being encouraged to adapt his use of language to the current way of life. His teacher, Mr. Yonatani, for example, explains:

> We don't talk about *putting people to a lot of trouble* any more—that expression is dead. A long time ago, when civilisation hadn't progressed to where it is now, there used to be a distinction between useful and useless people. You children mustn't carry on that way of thinking. (*LCT* 118)

The reference to "dead" expressions underscores the radical changes that the country has undergone, which are seen to necessitate an entirely different lexis. The new vocabulary mirrors the fact that children are no longer expected to be able to contribute physically to society. Similarly, "Labour Day" is changed to "Being Alive Is Enough Day" (*LCT* 44). Many of the linguistic changes are an attempt to avoid the older generations'

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feelings of guilt and shame at their role in the country's demise. Thus Mr. Yonatani explains: "These days it's popular to shout *graaaateful* as an expression of thanks […] but don't you think it might sound strange to the young elderly, the middle-aged elderly, and most of all to the aged elderly? It makes them uncomfortable, don't you see?" (*LCT* 118). For the older generations, it seems inappropriate for the young to be expressing gratitude towards those who bear responsibility for the severely impaired health and living conditions that the young now experience.

Yet while Yoshiro struggles with a sense that he no longer has anything relevant to teach young people (*LCT* 38), Mr. Yonatani still has hope that expanding children's language will be of value: "All he could teach them was how to cultivate language. He was hoping they themselves would plant, harvest, consume, and grow fat on words" (*LCT* 121). Since the children are unable to exercise the physical labour needed to literally plant and harvest crops, and since they struggle to chew and digest food, the cultivation of language is one of the few ways in which they can effectively participate in society and unlock possibilities for change. Sensitivity to language is vital in expanding capacities for thought and developing ethical awareness. As writer Jay Griffiths puts it: "to lose linguistic biodiversity is to lose untold ways of thinking and varieties of thought; to lose biodiversity of the mind" (221).

Addressing the environmental crisis thus requires engagement with alternative modes of thought, thereby countering the ecological crisis of language as well as inward-looking politics. In the novel, the only hope of improving the children's prospects is the secret project of sending a few select children out of Japan as emissaries, leading the narrator to muse:

> It was clearly necessary to think of the future along the curved lines of our round earth. The isolation policy that looked so invulnerable was actually nothing but a sand castle. You could destroy it, little by little, with those plastic shovels kids use at the beach." (*LCT* 130)

Thinking the future "along the curved lines of our planet earth" is not only an appeal for global conversation on ecological crisis, but belongs to Tawada's ecopoetic emphasis on playful intervention through circularity, randomness and surprise as a way of countering the limitations of linear thinking.

The end of the novel demonstrates these ecopoetic principles in action. Mumei, now fifteen years old and in a wheelchair, meets a girl, also in a wheelchair, who was once his neighbour, and finds himself attracted to her. The novel ironically plays with the narrative convention of the temporal jump to get to this point: "[Mumei] clearly remembered fainting one day when he was in elementary school while looking at a map of the world. At that moment, he had apparently leaped across time, propelled into the future" (*LCT* 126). Temporality runs according to the laws of narrative possibility, which are stretched here in surprising and unexpected ways. Mumei and Suiren roll towards the sea in their wheelchairs. In a dreamlike scene, their gender becomes fluid, and when Mumei looks at Suiren, her eyes blur into blotches that look like lungs, then broad beans, then human faces. Mumei sees Mr. Yonatani on one side and his great-grandfather on the other, and wants to reassure them; yet at that point "darkness, wearing a glove, reached

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for the back of his head to take hold of his brains, and Mumei fell into the pitch-black depths of the strait" (*LCT* 138). This has been read as a reference to the 2011 tsunami, an event that sparked the novel's creation but is never explicitly alluded to in the text (De Pieri n. p.). The ending foregrounds the intra-action of agencies, with Mumei's free association and then the dark water itself taking charge of the narrative, in an act of randomness that draws attention to the uncertainty of the future.

The depiction of agency as distributed does not mean relinquishing ethical responsibility, however. As Karen Barad put it in her "agential realist" account of entangled matter and meaning: "We need to meet the universe halfway, to take responsibility for the role that we play in the world's differential becoming" (396). While the future might seem hopeless to the older generation in the novel, relationships of care provide a source of hope: Yoshiro's physical care for Mumei, Mr. Yonatani's linguistic nurturing, and Mumei's emotional support for Yoshiro. Even in a world of random possibilities, taking responsibility for our actions and adopting an ethics of care remains vital.

Conclusion

Materialist approaches within ecocriticism have stressed the need to think matter and language together, as part of a dynamic network of intermingling agencies whose surprising intra-actions can be read as stories. Yōko Tawada's writing contributes to this approach. Her work starts with things and with words, which often lead in surprising directions. Abandoning the concept of authorial design as the imposition of form on inert matter, Tawada's surrealist poetics generate narrative possibility by paying attention to the agency of language and matter, allowing randomness to act as poetic principle. The depiction of absurd chains of events also highlights "hidden" agencies, and undermines the assumption that we can foresee all possible effects of our exploitation of nature. By placing emphasis on the random intra-actions of language and matter, Tawada's work decenters the human, but not without losing human concerns altogether, or relinquishing any form of human design. The design principle that Tawada's ecopoetics adopts is one that involves reading the complex and dynamic material environment, and allowing things to tell their own, often random and unexpected, stories. By entering into this process, we too may learn to listen to the animate world around us.

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